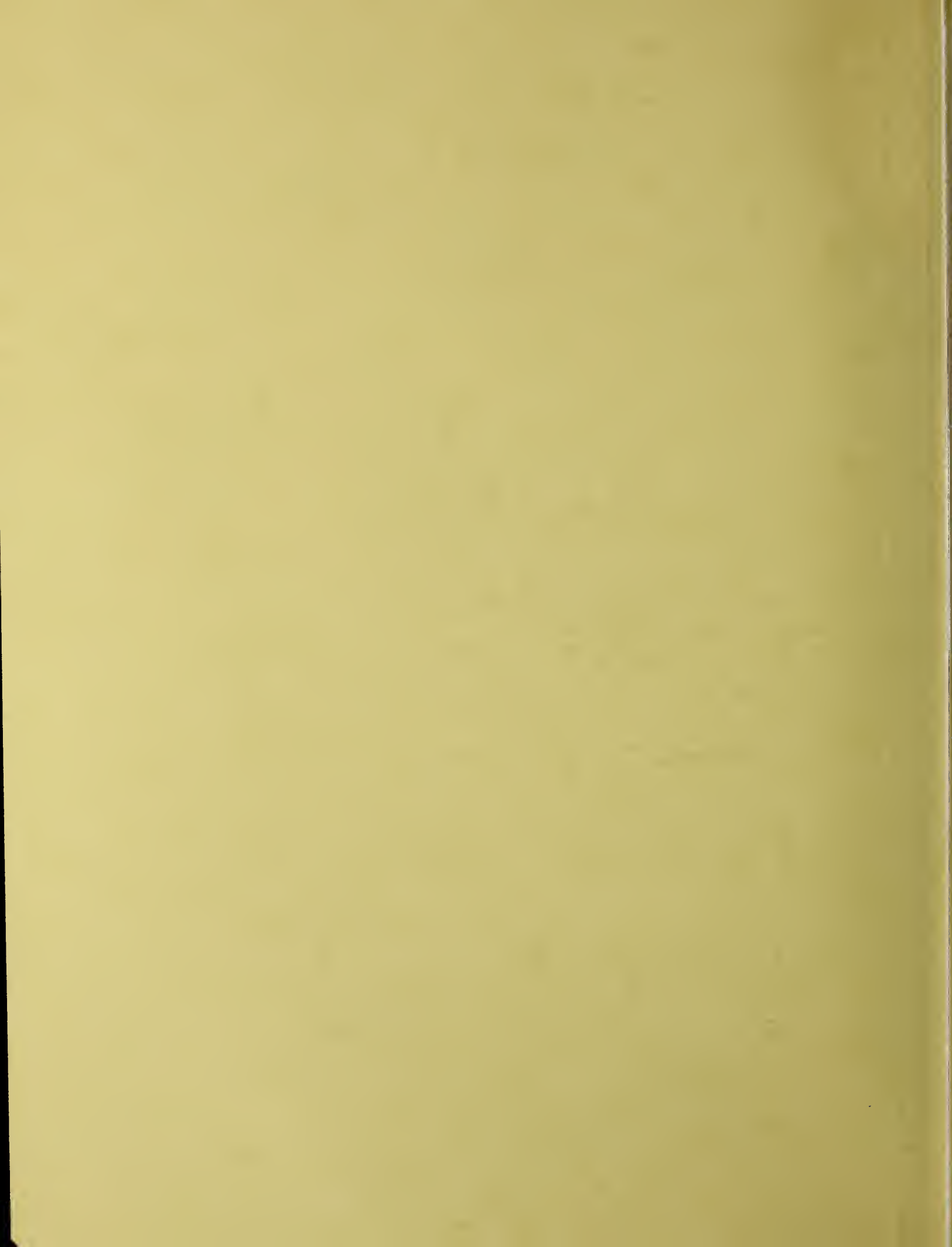


(CUMBERLAND COUNTY)

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Cumberland County

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

10-7-62

Controversial Cumberland

Whether history or legend, the residents prefer
their own stories on Lincoln, coffee and battle

CUMBERLAND County, which spreads across a 387-square-mile section of foothills country in Southern Kentucky, lays claim to at least four historic events which are controversial and/or unusual enough to merit a close audit of facts.

In no particular order, the claims are:

1. That Abraham Lincoln was born in the county.
2. That one of the most popular blends of coffee was developed in the county.
3. That the first oil well in America was drilled in the county.
4. That one of the truly unusual battles of the Civil War was fought at Burkesville, the county seat.

These events, plus spectacular scenery and nearness to Dale Hollow and Lake Cumberland, two of the major recreation lakes in the Eastern United States, give Cumberland County the kind of past-present ties which has led many residents to predict it has a bright future as a tourist region.

In spite of what the history books say, there are those in Cumberland County who contend that Lincoln just about had to be born there instead of at Hodgenville. And they present

a rather persuasive bit of circumstantial evidence to support their belief.

The Lincoln family was prominent in the county's early history. A Hannaniah Lincoln was the first sheriff after Cumberland was carved from Green and made Kentucky's 32d county in 1798. Thomas Lincoln, father of the 16th President, was the first constable of the county, from 1802 through 1804.

Support for the Abraham Lincoln birth legend comes from documents on file in the courthouse. These papers are records of land tracts taken up for homesteading in the county by his father. The dates are 1807 and 1815—proof, say Cumberland Countians, that Thomas Lincoln was in the county at least four years before and four years after the birth of his to-be-famous son in 1811.

The coffee blend supposedly developed in the county was originated after the Civil War by Joel Cheek, who was born a mile north of Burkesville.

As a young man, Cheek was a grocery drummer who rode on horseback over a wide area to visit country stores which bought staples from the wholesale firms he represented. Often as he rode along, he would munch on coffee beans which he carried as samples.

By accidentally mixing various types of coffee beans in his munching, the story goes, Cheek discovered that a blend was tastier than beans of the same kind. Later, after further experimenting, he was able to convince Nashville's leading hotel to give his coffee blend a try. As a result, the coffee blend which took the hotel's name was born.

Like the Lincoln birth legend, there is controversy surrounding Cumberland County's claim of being the location of America's first oil well. A mighty pool of oil was struck unintentionally north of Burkesville in 1829, but this was not the first oil well in this country. Oil had been struck in what now is McCreary County, Kentucky, prior to that time.

However, it is true that the Cumberland County well was the first from which oil was sold commercially. For many years, oil from the well was bottled and sold all over the country as a cure-all for most ailments known to man or beast.

The well, which came in a gusher, was known as the Great American Oil Well. It was tapped while Martin Beatty was drilling for salt water on the bank of Little Renox Creek, a tributary of the Cumberland River, north of Burkesville.

The unusual Civil War battle that took

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Fishing is good in the Cumberland River as well as in several nearby lakes.

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This marker near Burkesville is in the area of historic oil well.

Map of Cumberland County at left shows sites mentioned in story.

Rainbow trout thrive in river

place at Burkesville was fought on July 2, 1863, between John Hunt Morgan's Confederate cavalry, which then was moving out of Tennessee on a strike into Indiana and Ohio, and Union troops holding the town.

The Cumberland was flooded when the Confederates reached the shore opposite the town, and the Union defenders felt safe with the raging stream as a buffer. But during the night, elements of Morgan's force lashed logs together into rafts, stripped off their clothes and placed them along with weapons on the floats and crossed the river.

They were discovered just as they touched shore and had time only to seize their arms. It was, perhaps, the only time during the war when stark-naked troops pressed an attack.

The river for which it was named bisects the county and along most of its course has chewed a deep gorge from the hills. Burkesville sits on a flat plain just above the stream, but at the back of the town the bluff rises straight up for more than 300 feet.

Burkesville is only 24 miles from Wolf Creek Dam, the barrier across the Cumberland which creates Lake Cumberland. The water passing through the outlet in the base of the dam is so cold the year around that rainbow trout have been introduced in the river below the dam. Limit catches—some weighing 5 pounds and more—are common all along the stream's course in Cumberland County.

Some of the better fishing inlets on Dale Hollow Reservoir reach up into the county. One commercial dock is located on Hendricks Creek inlet, while the county has created a dock on Sulphur Creek where boats, motors and overnight accommodations are available.

Cumberland is an agricultural county and, generally speaking, the area north of the river is most productive. In fact, some of the state's finest farm land lies in Marrowbone Valley, an 18-mile-long region in the northwestern part of the county. There are two versions of how the valley was given its name. One contends it was because early settlers compared the richness of the soil to the marrow of a bone; another version holds that a pioneer explorer died after overeating buffalo bone marrow while camped in the section.

Tobacco is the No. 1 farm crop, followed by poultry.

Except along the flood plain of the Cumberland, much of the county south of the river is rough and farming is difficult. In the rugged southwest corner of the county is Coe Ridge, one of the most unusual spots in all of Kentucky.

There, in years immediately after the Civil War, Negroes settled and intermarried with Indians still in the area. Since it was almost impossible to scratch a living from the soil, many of the Coe Ridge residents turned to moonshine whisky-making. No passable roads cut across the ridge section and the heavy timber and deep gorges made it a perfect location for illegal distilling. Only in recent years have Federal agents been able to break up the activity.

Points of interest shown on the map:

1. **Great American Oil Well:** A marker alongside Kentucky Route 61 north of Burkesville locates the oil gusher struck in 1829.

2. **Joel Cheek Birthplace:** One mile north of Burkesville is the birthplace of the man who originated one of today's popular blends of coffee.

3. **Burkesville:** This town of 1,688 population (the county has 7,835 residents) is seat of Cumberland County. Priceless Lincoln records are on file in the courthouse.

4. **Marrowbone Valley:** Some of Kentucky's most fertile farm land lies in this part of the county.

5. **The Narrows:** The gravel road which leads into this part of the county follows the ridgetops. Here, at the bottom of a wide, horseshoe bend, the river can be seen far below on either side of the road.

6. **Coe Ridge:** This was once a famed moonshine whisky-making region.

7. **County Boat Dock:** Located on Sulphur Creek inlet of Dale Hollow, this area is reached over an access road which turns off from Kentucky Route 61.

8. **Rock House:** On the Cumberland-Russell County line adjacent to the river is a natural marvel—a 100-foot-deep, 40-foot-high opening carved by wind and water from the river bluff.

